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An Oasis of Grace...

With new home, couple expands efforts to comfort families of out-of-town cancer patients
“Hope Hollow offers assistance to out-of-town cancer patients”

By **Ken Gordon**

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While her husband lay dying, Kathy Ousley slept in her pickup truck.

Having learned in May 2013 that he had terminal bone cancer, Vaughn Ousley was admitted to the Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital at Ohio State University.

The couple lived 80 miles away, in the Guernsey County town of Cambridge.

“I had no place to stay up there,” Mrs. Ousley said. “I slept by his side as much as I could, but I slept in the parking lot for a long time.”

Eventually, a social worker connected her with Kevin Clark and Jane Jacquemin-Clark.

The residents of the Clintonville neighborhood run Hope Hollow, a nonprofit that helps out-of-town cancer patients and their families.

Hope Hollow paid for several weeks of hotel stays for Mrs. Ousley — until her husband died in August 2013 at age 54.

Two years later, her voice still trembles when she looks back on the time — with grief but gratitude.

“They are the most magnificent people I have ever met in my life,” she said of the Clarks. “To help someone when they’re at the lowest point in their life, it just brings tears to my eyes. You just don’t see many good people like that anymore.”

Paying for lodging wasn’t what the Clarks originally planned.

In 2008, they bought a 4,600-square-foot house on the Northwest Side with the idea of renovating it, then inviting needy patients or families to stay there with them.

For a couple with limited resources, though, the renovation took longer than expected.

Jacquemin-Clark recently retired from a teaching and counseling job at Bishop Watterson High School; her husband will retire this month as deputy chief probation officer for the Franklin County Municipal Court.

Wanting to help others while the house was being prepared, the Clarks registered a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization in 2009 and began to cover food and lodging for families.

They have paid for 437 nights since, with 225 of them this year.

“We didn’t realize the magnitude of the need,” Jacquemin-Clark said.

The desire to help was inspired by her history: She lost her mother and an aunt to cancer, and she survived a 2007 bout with medullary thyroid cancer — a type not often discovered until it has spread elsewhere, at which point it has a 10-year survival rate of 20 percent. (She also survived breast cancer in 2010.)

Her thyroid cancer was caught early, and the experience changed her profoundly.

“I thank God every single day of my life for my life,” she said. “And I thought, ‘I have got to find a way — as concrete as possible — to live this gratitude.’”

From talking to other cancer patients and survivors, the Clarks learned of the lodging needs of some patients and relatives.

Some are accommodated through groups such as the American Cancer Society or social workers at hospitals — who work with hotels to provide free or discounted rooms.

“But there are times when we can’t make that work,” said Celeste Lauer, a senior manager with the society’s East Central division, which includes Ohio and Pennsylvania.

“Maybe somebody needs too many free nights, or there’s a big concert or event in town over a weekend and the rooms aren’t available.”

In such cases, she said, the Clarks are called.

“They have never turned me down.”

Lauer on Wednesday will present the Clarks with the Excellence in Mission Award for 2014 at the board meeting of the American Cancer Society of Franklin County.

To ensure that the help they offer is truly needed, the couple rely on referrals from social workers and the cancer society.



Which explains how Sue Skinner came to know the Clarks.

Her husband, Dan, learned in 2013 that he had leukemia.

They lived in the Butler County town of Oxford — so, off and on for more than two years, Mrs. Skinner benefited from free lodging and more, courtesy of Hope Hollow.

“These people were sent to me by the Lord; they really were,” said Skinner, whose husband died last month.

“You can just feel the love. They gave me food or vouchers or gift cards to restaurants. They would stop by and drop off goodies.

“They treated me like royalty.”

After more than seven years of work, with time and materials donated by many businesses, the Hope Hollow residence is ready.

The house was renovated and the property landscaped to resemble a New England country home, Jacquemin-Clark said.

The large windows admit plenty of natural light, and inspirational sayings adorn the walls of the four bedrooms — three for guests and one for the Clarks.

In recent weeks, the couple welcomed the first guests.

Natalie Pennyman, manager of the Social Work Department at the James, toured Hope Hollow, invited by the Clarks.

“As soon as I walked into the house, I was like ‘Did I just get hugged?’” she said. “It just feels like home.”

His efforts with Hope Hollow, Clark said, provide a welcome contrast to the challenges of his work as a probation officer.

“When that’s all you do all day, you think: ‘Oh, my gosh, is everybody addicted to drugs? Does everybody beat their wives?’” he said. “And with Hope Hollow, there have been so many moments of grace, it truly has restored my perception of humanity.”

The couple realized early on, Jacquemin-Clark said, that their work needed to encompass not just meals and lodging but relationships, too.

Ousley attests to their commitment: In the two years since her husband died, the couple have continued to check on her.

“Usually, when a spouse dies, everybody falls away, like you’re a third wheel,” she said. “But they said they would keep in touch, and they have.

“I wish I had been left a lot of money. The first thing I would have done was turn it all over to them.”

For more information, visit www.hopehollow.com.



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